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ABSTRACT

Homes for the Homeless initiated a family and community approach to learning at its American Family Inns (homeless shelters) via a customized, shelter-based, accelerated after-school program, Brownstone/FutureLink. The program helps improve students' grades, self-confidence, and academic potential. It requires parents, shelter staff, and public school officials to participate. This report describes specific ways in which the program breaks down the educational barriers that homeless children face and improves their chances of success. Brownstone/FutureLink emphasizes problem solving and reasoning skills rather than repetition and drills. It is based on the belief that students who are behind should not be given remedial education but rather should be challenged by a fast track approach to learning. Students are successfully engaged in their education, as demonstrated by completed assignments and improved grades. There is a low student-teacher ratio and access to technology. The social development that occurs is the result of challenging students to be mentors and leaders. By carefully integrating a network of programs and services and forging powerful links to the public schools, a community of opportunity is formed that encourages learning as a family activity. At the cost of $10 per day per child, these shelter-based after-school programs are very cost effective. (SM)

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Back to the Future: The Brownstone and FutureLink After-School Programs for Homeless Children

A Report of the Institute for Children and Poverty

November 2001

Homes for the Homeless
Institute for Children and Poverty

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Back to the Future:

When Jeanie first came to the Brownstone program she was eleven years old and reading at a 3rd grade level. She now reads at her class level and her mother is learning to read with her. It took a shelter-based program to make this happen.

The Problem

Two of the greatest problems facing homeless children are the lack of continuity in their education and their capacity to stay in school. As their families move from the homes of relatives to friends, and apartments to shelters, their learning process is disrupted. Nationally, one-fifth of homeless children (20%) repeat a grade in school, and sixteen percent (16%) are enrolled in special education classes—rates one-hundred percent (100%) and thirty-three percent (33%) higher than their non-homeless counterparts (see Figure 1). And, in a single school year, twelve percent (12%) miss at least one-month of classes and thirty-three percent (33%) miss at least two weeks.

In New York City, only twenty-three percent (23%) of homeless children score at grade-level in math and only thirty-eight percent (38%) score at grade-level in reading.[1] This is not because they cannot learn, but the result of chaotic living situations, multiple relocations, and continuous school transfers. In the end, unless their education is enriched and stabilized and becomes a priority for parents, public schools, and the shelters they reside in, these children will be at severe risk of dropping out of school and continuing a predictable path into poverty and eventual homelessness as young adults.

The Response

Homes for the Homeless *knows* that education is a homeless child's best chance to succeed in life. But, their success in school depends on their access to academic enrichment and extra support, their parents' involvement and encouragement, and a deliberate and consistent effort to bridge in-school and after-school activities. With these components in mind, HFH initiated a family and community approach to learning at its American Family Inns by creating a customized, shelter-based, accelerated after-school program for homeless children.[2] The purpose of this program is to improve students' grades, their self-confidence, and ultimately their academic potential. The program requires parents, shelter staff, and public school officials to participate in the education of homeless children. Essentially, at each American Family Inn, an entire *community* becomes involved in every child's growth and development. This report describes the specific ways in which this new after-school program breaks down the educational barriers that homeless children face and improves their chances of success.

Brownstone and FutureLink: Accelerated Learning

On average, a typical homeless student spends an entire school year without a permanent home. But, in many cases, this is not a single event; over twenty-seven percent (27%) have been homeless more than once, further interrupting their educational progress (see Figure 2). In addition, over half (56%) transfer schools during the school year, with twenty-one percent (21%) transferring two or more times (see Figure 3). Such disruptions prevent teachers from appropriately assessing a child's specific needs and lead to a four to six month academic recovery period.[3] By the time these children reach their junior year, their chances of finishing high school are slim.[4]

In response to these academic challenges, HFH designed Brownstone/FutureLink—an accelerated after-school program that emphasizes problem solving and reasoning skills rather

Figure 1: A Comparison of Educational Setbacks for Homeless and Non-Homeless Students

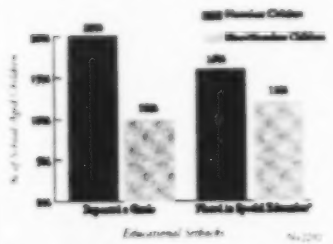


Figure 2: Relationship Between Episodes of Homelessness and Educational Setbacks

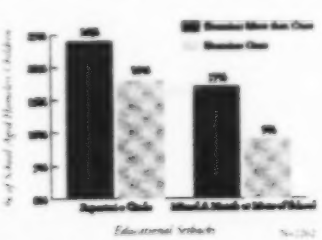
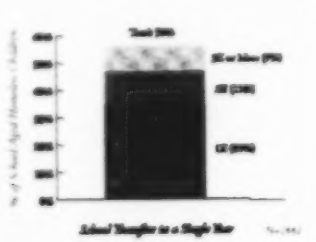


Figure 3: School Transfers of Homeless Children In A Single Year



Source: Institute for Children and Poverty (1999); National Center for Education Statistics

[1] National Data

[2] This is important because homeless students are often placed in special education not because they have learning disabilities but because teachers assume that they are not capable of keeping up with other students.

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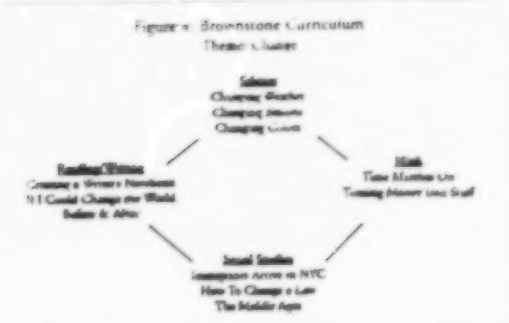
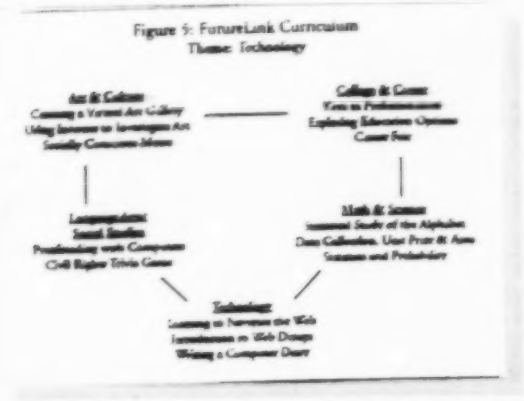


The theme of change is represented in each unit in the Brownstone curriculum. The lessons listed above are particularly useful in helping homeless children deal with the instability in their lives.

than repetition and drills. Based on the Stanford University model developed by Henry Levin, the program operates with the core belief that students who are behind should not be given remedial education, but rather, challenged by a fast track approach to learning, which offers advanced academic activities and curricula.[3]

The cornerstone of this program is its two unique curricula. Each academic unit is literacy-focused and includes activities that support a child's school-day learning. By using a project-rich, hands-on approach, it challenges children to reach beyond their initial capacities. The Brownstone School curriculum uses the theme of *change* as the centerpiece to its activities for children ages 5-12 (see Figure 4). Using change as a focus allows teachers to address the issues of instability that homeless children see in their daily lives. In addition, the Brownstone School offers science experiments, math activities relevant to young children, reading and conflict resolution circles, theatrical productions, arts and crafts, and recreation.

The FutureLink curriculum uses the theme of *technology* in an effort to make learning interesting and fun for homeless teenagers (see Figure 5). All curriculum activities involve using computers and other technologies as tools to improve teens' academic competencies. Homeless children still do not enjoy the same access to technology as other children. The FutureLink program attempts to not only eliminate this barrier, but also to develop skills in an area that has promise for a future of employment and/or higher education. During the course of a year, FutureLink offers intensive Internet activities, computer journals, small group, staff-led chat sessions, pairing with a younger, Brownstone student as a "buddy," other leadership opportunities, and organized sports.



The five academic units in the FutureLink curriculum all contain lessons that use technology as the primary tool. Above are a few examples of the variety of computer-based activities teens work on while in FutureLink.

In addition to the curricula, the three critical program elements of the after-school program are the on-site location, linkages to the public schools, and the integration of family programs that foster parental involvement. The fact that children return home to the Inn to attend their after-school program allows them to learn in a familiar and comforting setting, facilitates recruitment and retention, and eliminates transportation obstacles. Brownstone/FutureLink staff visit the local public schools to improve communication and school teachers' understanding of individual student's needs. They also serve as a resource for parents to help them understand the school system and their child's educational rights. And, the integration and coordination of adult, child, and family programs at the American Family Inn fosters parental involvement in the after-school program, which encourages learning as a shared family activity that continues in the home.

The typical homeless child, plagued by residential instability, struggles with ongoing school transfers, missed school days, and the fear of being left back. Nonetheless, they can succeed in school. It takes the right program with the right people in the right place.
- Dr. Nunez, Homes for the Homeless, NYC

Gaining Ground

The benefits of after-school programs have been universally recognized. A recent study found that children who attend high quality after-school programs have better peer relations, emotional adjustment, conflict resolution skills, grades, and conduct in school compared to those who do not.[4] The Brownstone/FutureLink program has shown similar results in improved academics, decreased negative behaviors, and increased positive attitudes.

By presenting academic subjects in a way that makes learning fun and teaches problem-solving skills, the Brownstone and FutureLink curricula successfully engage children in their education as demonstrated by completed assignments and improved grades. Since attending the program, fifty-nine percent (59%) of students improve their overall grade point average. And, in all subjects that correspond to a unit in the Brownstone or FutureLink curriculum, students show significant progress: sixty percent (60%) improve in reading, fifty-six

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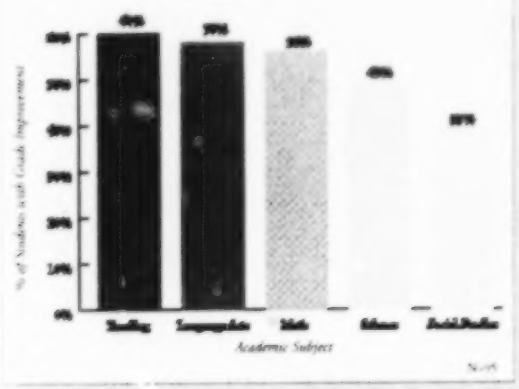
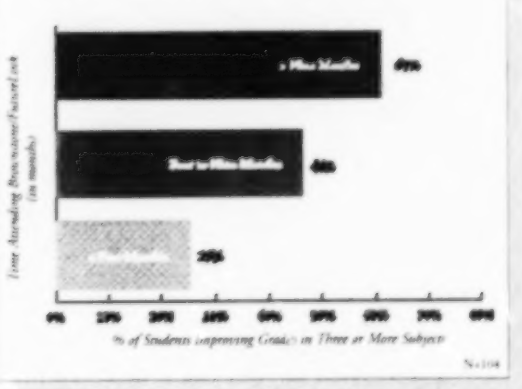
Figure 6: Brownstone/FutureLink Students Improvement in Grades By Academic Subject



Students who attended Brownstone/FutureLink show improvement in several academic subjects. In particular, over half show improvement in reading, math, and language arts grades.

Figure 7: Length of Time Attending Brownstone/FutureLink and Improvement in Grades



The longer children attend Brownstone/FutureLink, the greater the improvement in grades.

percent (56%) in math, fifty-eight percent (58%) in language arts, forty-nine percent (49%) in science, and thirty-nine percent (39%) in social studies (see Figure 6). In addition, ninety-seven percent (97%) of students are completing their homework assignments on time, and eighty-two percent (82%) are more confident in the assignments that they hand in.

This academic progress is a direct result of specific components of the program and its curricula. A low student-to-teacher ratio ensures that each child receives individual attention, assistance, and encouragement with school assignments. The access to technology allows students to complete school-work on the computer just like their non-homeless peers. For the younger children, the Brownstone reading circles allow them to practice literacy skills, vocabulary, and spelling in groups of peers that read at the same level, as opposed to being grouped by grade. Younger children learn math skills by making change in a candy store and then connect that activity to the changing seasons in their science lesson.

When I do better in school it makes me like school again.
- Venessa, Age 11, Prospect Family Inn

The older students in FutureLink conduct sophisticated Internet searches with staff guidance and discuss the connections that lead them to the correct answers, thereby developing reasoning skills that apply to several subject areas. Teenagers experiment with the latest in CD-ROM encyclopedia research tools and practice study techniques to prepare for upcoming exams. Finally, younger and older students benefit from the "read alouds" between Brownstone and FutureLink "buddies" during which the pairs discuss various book components such as plot, characters, and setting. Each of these accelerated, academic elements, and many more, have led to the majority of Brownstone/FutureLink children improving their grades in a significant number of subjects.

Children must participate in order to reap these academic benefits, and fortunately, the Brownstone/FutureLink program has been very successful at recruiting and retaining students—seventy-five percent (75%) of all eligible school-age children at the American Family Inns attend the after-school program. Moreover, almost half of them (41%) have attended for over nine months, or an entire school year. As expected, the longer these students attend Brownstone/FutureLink, the better they do in school. While only a quarter of those participating for less than four months (25%) show improvement in a majority of academic subjects, that number doubles (46%) for those attending between four and nine months, and jumps to sixty-one percent (61%) for those attending over nine months. Clearly, the children find the hands-on activities engaging, and the program's on-site location accessible, as demonstrated by their consistent attendance. As a result, their grades improve within a relatively short period of time and continue to do so the longer they are in the program (see Figure 7).

When I come to Brownstone, I get to read fun books. And when I mess up on a word, there is someone there to help me.
- Myriah, Age 9, Saratoga Family Inn

Positive Behavior and Healthy Attitudes

The social development that occurs in the Brownstone/FutureLink program is also a result of particular components of the accelerated after-school model. The staff is trained to challenge students to reach beyond their initial capabilities, and almost always, the children rise to the occasion. By accepting mentorship roles and other leadership positions, students develop a sense of responsibility, and as they grow into these roles, their self-confidence improves. Since attending the pro-

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gram, seventy-nine percent (79%) of students feel better about their own abilities. This improved level of confidence leads children to miss less school. In fact, school absenteeism rates drop by forty-two percent (42%) for those with the higher levels of self-confidence.

Improved self-esteem is also promoted in student "chat" sessions. Students participate in open forums where staff trained in conflict resolution techniques encourage them to share opinions, concerns, and emotions in a safe, non-judgmental environment. As a result of learning and practicing these communication skills, teachers report that eighty-seven percent (87%) of students are able to make friends more easily, eighty-three percent (83%) are more cooperative, and sixty-four percent (64%) fight less.

Younger kids love having an older buddy (teenager). It really gives them someone to look up to. The teens don't realize they have something to offer until they become a mentor.
– FutureLink staff, Saratoga Family Inn

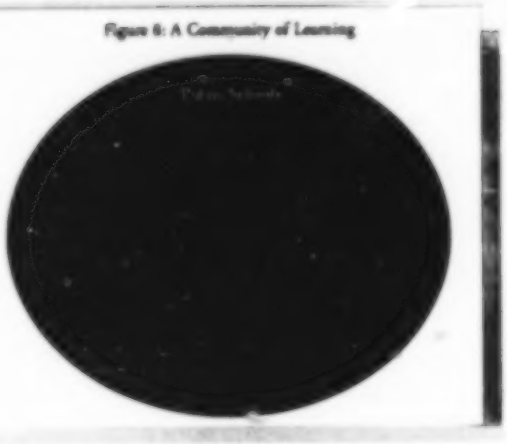
A Community Approach to Learning

At American Family Inns, parents, public school teachers, and shelter staff each have a distinct and important role to play in helping homeless children succeed in school. By carefully integrating and coordinating a network of programs and services and forging powerful links to the public schools, a "community of opportunity" is formed which encourages learning as a shared family activity. For example, by encouraging parents to continue their own education, staff foster their involvement in their children's education. Parental participation in shelter-based programs stimulates and reinforces children's participation and vice versa.

The American Family Inn provides multiple opportunities for parents to become involved directly, many for the first time, in their child's education. Parents chaperone special field trips in the Brownstone/FutureLink program, serve as teacher aides, create costumes for drama events, and act as the most powerful recruiters for additional parent support and involvement. Parents with children enrolled in Brownstone/FutureLink are far more active in the on-site Parent Association—a forum for discussing children's report cards, standardized tests, and other school issues—than other parents. At these meetings, parents are introduced to after-school staff that accompany them to parent-teacher conferences, act as translators where language is a barrier, explain school policies, and offer concrete suggestions for actively supporting their child's education (see Figure 8).

[Their mother] is determined to have them do well in school. She knows how much they have fallen behind. She wants them in this program.
– Brownstone staff about Luis and Gina, Ages 7 and 9, Prospect Family Inn

Figure 8: A Community of Learning



The integration of the after school program, the parents, and the surrounding public schools makes academic success possible for homeless children. A true community of learning comes together to support homeless children in building the chance for a better future.

Connections to the public schools are also an important focus at American Family Inns. In order to better serve homeless children, HFH staff spend at least two mornings per week with public school teachers and administrators discussing individual students and their particular needs, informing public school officials of the complex issues surrounding homelessness, and facilitating ongoing communication between parents and teachers. As a result, public school teachers report that they are now more likely to directly communicate with the parents of their homeless students and that they better understand the academic challenges for these children (see Figure 8). The relationship between the schools and the American Family Inns has progressed so much so that one of the middle school principals attends the Parent Association meetings twice a year to distribute and discuss each student report card with parents.

Working with the outreach coordinator from the Saratoga [American Family Inn] has been incredibly helpful. I now see parents I never would have met otherwise. This is working!
– Public School Teacher, PS. 52, NYC

So How Much Does This Cost?

At the cost of only $10 per day per child, shelter-based after-school programs for homeless children are extremely cost effective. With an annual cost of $1800 per child for the Brownstone/FutureLink program, as compared to the annual cost of $8700 per student to repeat a grade of school in New York City, the choice should be obvious. If the Brownstone/FutureLink program prevents just one homeless child from being left back, it not only saves the taxpayers thousands of dollars, it is sound public policy (see Table 1). In fact, this year

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Table 1: Fiscal Impact of Brownstone/FutureLink After-School Program

# of Homeless Children	Annual Cost of Brownstone/FutureLink	Annual Cost of Repeating 1 Grade in School	Annual Savings from After-School Programming
1	$1,400	$4,700	$3,300
10	$14,000	$47,000	$33,000
100	$140,000	$470,000	$330,000

Source: New York City Board of Education

alone, 200 homeless children, all at risk of repeating a grade, will participate in Brownstone/FutureLink. If each of those children is promoted to the next grade, this after-school program will have saved New York City $1.4 million.

A Community of Opportunity

Today, shelters are homes to over one million children in the United States; homes in the sense that families are living there for extended periods, in some cases, over two years. With these extended stays in mind, HFH has transformed its American Family Inns into communities of opportunity: parents return to their education, while children begin and enhance theirs, parents are job-readied, trained and employed, and young mothers gain independent living skills—eliminating dependence on public assistance. But most importantly, the Family Inn community offers a safe environment where children do not feel displaced; they can turn their backs on the label of homelessness until their families move on to permanent housing.

This is the purpose on which the Brownstone/FutureLink after-school program was developed and, within this environment, it has succeeded and flourished. If every shelter in every town across America, were to replace their temporary way-station mission with the long-term community approach, we could ensure that homeless children are successfully mainstreamed in the public school system where they belong. We could provide families with the tools they need to compete in the housing and employment markets and succeed. Ultimately, we can strengthen families so that they can learn, work, and live together in their own home.

But this calls for a different kind of commitment at a very different time in our country. Family homelessness began almost twenty years ago, and despite fighting for low-income housing since that time, we have achieved only modest increases. Few of us would have predicted that homelessness would become entrenched in our social systems, but it has. That means children will continue to grow up in shelters—their new long-term homes—and, for their sake, we must change shelter environments and how they operate. The Brownstone/FutureLink program is just an example of the many successful shelter-based programs you can find across America. The sooner we can offer these children and their parents a home and a sense of community, the sooner they will be ready to maintain and contribute to one. We should start with what we have, shelters, and turn them into communities, making them homes children thrive in. If we do this we will witness first hand that "it takes a community to end homelessness."

Endnotes

1. Ralph Nunez, "Access to Success: Meeting the Educational Needs of Homeless Children and Families," *Social Work in Education* 16, no. 1 (January 1994), 25.
2. For a complete discussion of the American Family Inns concept, refer to: Nunez, Ralph, *The New Poverty: Homeless Families in America*, (New York City: Insight Books, 1996).
3. Laurene M. Heybach and Patricia Nix-Hodes, "Reducing Mobility: Good for Kids, Good for Schools," *The Beam: The Newsletter of the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth* 9, no. 1 (1999): 5.
4. Ralph Nunez, "Homeless In America: A Children's Story, Part I", *The Journal of Children and Poverty* 16, no.1 (March 2000).
5. US Department of Education, What Works: Research about Teaching and Learning (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1987), 57.
6. National Institute on Out of School Time Fact Sheet. Available at: www.niost.org.
7. Recognizing that families are staying in transitional housing for longer periods of time, shelters can become Communities of Opportunity, rather than just temporary way stations. American Family Inns are an example of how a community can be formed within a shelter, thereby reducing the stigma of homeless for parents and their children. For more information on Communities of Opportunity, see *A Shelter is Not a Home—Or Is It?* (New York City: Institute for Children and Poverty, 2001).

The FutureLink program was developed with funding from the Picower Foundation. As a result of their generous support, Homes for the Homeless secured ongoing New York State funding for the program, through the State Advantage After-School initiative. Brownstone/FutureLink is the only shelter-based after-school program in New York State to receive this funding.

Brownstone/FutureLink curricula are available. The Brownstone curriculum is designed for children ages 5 to 11, and the FutureLink curriculum is designed for teenage youth aged 12 to 17.

To order please contact:
Homes for the Homeless
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Homes for the Homeless (HFH) is a private, non-profit organization based in New York City that operates American Family Inns. Since 1986, HFH has worked to break the cycle of poverty and dependence among homeless families through education-based services.

The **Institute for Children and Poverty** is an independent research and policy think tank that works in close association with Homes for the Homeless. Through the development of effective public policy initiatives and the dissemination of quantitative research findings, the Institute examines and offers unique strategies to combat the impact of homelessness and poverty on the lives of children and their families.

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Communities of Opportunity

At Homes for the Homeless (HFH) we believe that the key to ending homelessness lies in a continuum of services that meet the multiple needs of homeless families. This continuum is grounded in education and must address both the primary needs of families as well as provide them with the tools they need to break the cycle of homelessness and poverty. For this reason HFH created the American Family Inn—a *Community of Opportunity* for homeless families. It takes a community to end homelessness.

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